

KING CONTROVERSIES IN THE NEWS

Family Supports Ray Trial

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BY A CURIOUS twist of fate, Black History Month finds the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in the news in several diverse ways almost 29 years after his assassination.

This month, King's family threw its weight behind an effort to win a full-blown trial for James Earl Ray, who waived a trial when he pleaded guilty to the murder in 1969, then recanted his story — saying he was drawn into an assassination plot but was not actually the shooter.

The civil-rights leader's son Dexter King said the family hoped a new trial would answer lingering questions. "I don't think his trial — if he is granted a trial — will necessarily give us the unequivocal proof," Dexter King said. "But at least, in regard to new evidence, we will know more than we do now."

Moreover, even before the King family made its views known, a judge in Memphis, Tenn., where King was murdered, ordered a hearing to permit Ray's lawyers to present what they claim is new evidence in the case. Primarily, they contend that the fatal bullet is too mutilated to be matched to the presumed murder rifle — admittedly owned by Ray and bearing his fingerprints. At the court hearing Thursday, Ray's lawyers asked a judge to authorize new tests on the rifle in an attempt to show the weapon could not have fired the fatal bullet. The judge ruled in favor of such tests, but the actual tests cannot be performed until a higher court upholds the Memphis judge's decision. Ray has made various claims about the rifle — among them that it was not the murder weapon and that it may have been the murder weapon but someone else fired the fatal shot. Prosecutors say the bullet is so damaged it cannot be matched to any weapon but that an abundance of evidence proves Ray was the killer. Ray, serving a 99-year prison sentence, has been seriously ill in recent months with a liver ailment.

Martin Luther King Jr. also has been in the news because of a continuing controversy surrounding his family's attempts to control use of his speeches, his writings and efforts to memorialize him. The family — long revered by many Americans — has now been accused by critics of trying to capitalize on King's



AP Photo

With his father's picture hanging in the background, Dexter King speaks Thursday at a news conference supporting a trial for James Earl Ray.

name for power and profit. King's heirs have made a multimillion-dollar deal with the Time Warner empire for publication of books written by and about King, audio recordings, a CD-ROM and a King site on the World Wide Web.

The family has repeatedly tried to collect licensing fees from the media for use of King's speeches. Historians have been threatened with lawsuits for quoting King's speeches and writings without permission. Certain scholars have complained that they have been denied access to papers controlled by the family.

Author Taylor Branch, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his account of King's early years in the civil-rights movement, complained about the family's "monopoly control" in testimony at a trial dealing with the use of 83,000 papers King had donated to Boston University.

Three days later, Branch said, he received a letter from King family lawyers serving notice that King's speeches and writings are copyrighted and "no commercial or proprietary usage may be made without prior written licensing from the heirs of Dr. King." A jury ruled in the Boston University case that, since King himself had donated those papers, they belonged to the university — not the family.

An editor at The Atlanta Journal said the King estate sent a threatening letter when the paper published parts of King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech